IMPORTANT TO ARCHITECTS AND CONTRACTORS.

Last week an action was brought by Mr. Mansfield, the landlord of Oliver's Coffee-house, at the foot of Westminster-bridge, to recover compensation from the defendants, Messrs. Grissell and Peto, the contractors for building the new Houses of Parliament, and Mr. Charles Barry, the architect, for damage done to the coffee-house in sinking the foundations for a portion of the new structure. It seemed that in the progress of the works, which were carried on in 1842, it became necessary to obtain a solid foundation for the clock tower, which now raises its ornamented turrets within a few yards of Oliver's Coffee-house. Excavations were accordingly made, but from some cause or other the foundations of the plaintiff's house, which is built on a quicksand, as are all the buildings in the city of Westminster which are near the river, were so much weakened, that the superstructure cracked and yawned in several places, and Mr. Mansfield and his family entertained great apprehensions that the building would tumble about their ears. Representations were accordingly made to Mr. Barry about the state of the house; and some palliation, in the shape of shoring and cement, were applied; but the excavations for the foundation of the clock tower were still continued, and in the middle of June, 1842, the foundations of the coffee-house sunk so much, that the whole of Mr. Mansfield's family, about 9 or 10 o'clock, fled, many of them in their night-dresses, out of the house for their lives. The precautions taken, however, preserved the house from coming down, but the proprietor was seriously injured in his business during the progress of the works, and the house has been so much shaken, that it is doubtful whether it will ever be put to a state of thorough repair, without pulling it down and rebuilding it. The question for the decision of the jury was, whether the defendants had been guilty of negligence; and the testimony adduced was of a very contradictory character. On the part of the defendants, the witnesses stated that every possible precaution had been taken in order to prevent the catastrophe which had occurred; while the evidence given on the part of the plaintiff certainly went to show that all was not done which might have been done.

Mr. Justice Coltman summed up, and the jury returned a verdict for the plaintiff,—damages 700*l*.

New Books.

The Pictorial Gallery of Arts, Charles Knight, London. 1845.

In this work, published every month, it is proposed by the aid of *three or four thousand engravings* to open to view the entire kingdom of technical skill in all its more important operations: to shew, man in every region of the earth labouring to surround himself with those necessaries, comforts, and conveniences, which constitute the elements of civilization, and then, going forward into the higher range of arts, surrounding his life with the attributes of taste, and ultimately reaching the highest development of the principle of beauty. This, which, for any other publisher would be a very expensive work, Mr. Knight is able to effect at very small cost, by employing engravings already used in other works, and which when brought together, assist each other to elucidate particular subjects and so acquire fresh value. The first volume will be devoted to what are generally called the useful arts, the second will illustrate architecture, sculpture, and painting. The first part, now before us, treats of the arts contributory to food. As calculated to lead the young we cannot recommend it too strongly.

The Builders' Price Book for 1845. By W. Laxton, Surveyor, 10, Fludyer-street, London.

This is the 19th edition of Mr. Laxton's useful volume, and contains upwards of eight thousand prices, and three thousand valuable memoranda. It needs no recommendation, or we would gladly give it.

Correspondence.

COMPETITION FOR LAYING OUT GROUND, KING'S-ROAD, READING.

Sir,—After all that has been written upon architectural competition, you will perhaps be unwilling to devote much more of the space in your valuable journal to the subject, but I think Mr. Blendy's letter in the last number of The Builder should not be allowed to pass without comment, as the plan he adopted for obtaining a decision on the designs in the late competition at *Reading*, appears, as far as I can learn, to have produced any thing but satisfaction. This may not arise so much from any defect in the plan itself, as from the manner of carrying it out. He states that in consequence of a letter to The Builder, he determined to make the *competitors themselves* the judges of the designs, and that he is well satisfied with the result of the experiment, there being so many almost equally balanced in point of merit, and with a view of proving this, has sent you a list of the designs which obtained votes and the number recorded for each, which certainly shews the diversity of opinion; but then, I would ask, *was there any standard laid down for the judges to go upon?* For amongst upwards of forty competitors great variety of design was to be expected, and consequently great difference of opinion with regard to the merits of each. Judging from a letter in your journal a short time since from a "Regular Subscriber," who, I presume, has been the designs, two great mistakes appear to have been made by the promoter of this competition. In the first place, "a set of *rules* is printed for the guidance of the competitors in preparing their designs, which it is stated in the preamble "*the proprietor will require to be adhered to by those who intend to compete.*"

The first condition is, "That the designs shall be delineated upon plans of the same scale as the one now furnished (being one chain and a half to the inch), and be drawn in simple outline with Indian ink, the roads coloured yellow and the sewerage blue."

The second is, "That if it should be considered by you desirable that uniformity should be observed in the erection of a class or classes of houses, that a ground-plan and elevation of such houses should accompany your design, and the estimated cost of erection stated."

And with reference to the award of the premiums, it is stated that "each competitor will be required to attend, in Reading on a certain day to be notified to him, then and there to give me his opinion in writing, which design he considers possesses most merit, and which is the next deserving (of course he must omit his own design)."

Now, to the first of these rules, very few of the competitors have thought proper to attend, beyond drawing their designs to the specified scale, for the plans are in many cases got up very elaborately and tickled up so as to attract the eye, the buildings being deeply back-lined in dark lake colour, and the grounds all laid out in walks and beds of different colours; and such is, I am assured, the case with those plans to which the premiums have been awarded.

To the second rule, several competitors have paid no attention, and have merely sent in block-plans, without elevations or ground-plans of the houses as required.

And thirdly, if Mr. Blendy is correct as to the number of competitors, they cannot all have attended to give their votes, for by looking over the list of those who have voted (the publication of which, by the way, the competitors will, I should imagine, look upon as a breach of confidence) the names of only twenty-six will be found, thus leaving upwards of fourteen who have not chosen to go to the expense of a visit to Reading for the purpose of giving their votes, but who, nevertheless, have been allowed the chance of obtaining votes for their own designs from those who did attend, by not having them withdrawn from the competition, which seems to me to have been the proper course to pursue; for surely some distinction ought to have been made between those who complied with all the rules and conditions, and those who did not.

In conclusion, I would I ask, where is the use of having rules and conditions printed for a competition, if it is made optional with the competitors whether they abide by them or not, as has been done in the present instance? Where instructions are given, the first thing for the judges to ascertain should be, in which designs they have been most closely followed, and thus the author of such designs would be placed in a proper and fair position; but in the late competition every one has been left entirely to his own caprice and fancy in his award of the premiums. Would it not have given much more satisfaction if a set of questions had been prepared, and a copy given to each competitor, in which, in addition to stating which two plans he considered most deserving, he should have also been required to state *whether such plans were in accordance with the printed instructions*, and if not, with which had they not complied, and also in *which* two designs he considered the authors had most fully complied with the said rules? and then the premiums should have been awarded to those designs which had a majority of these opinions in their favour.

If I am misinformed as to any of the details I have alluded to, I trust that some of the competitors, who I dare say are readers of your useful journal, will be good enough to set me right, as my only object, in thus addressing you, is to state what I consider ought to have been the course adopted in order to give so novel a mode of deciding on the comparative merits of a set of designs, a fair and impartial trial, and which I consider, unless great caution is used in its application, is open to great abuse.

Apologizing for thus intruding so much on your valuable space,—I remain, Sir, yours, &c.

Feb. 5th, 1845. Fairplay.

FRESCOES AT BUCKINGHAM PALACE.

Sir,—Observing in your number for 1st February a notice that the frescoes in the Casino of the gardens at Buckingham Palace had failed, I venture to say you will upon inquiry, find this general condemnation incorrect. It is to be regretted that uncertain rumours obtained circulation respecting this first but distinguished effort to introduce to England a specimen of the higher examples of Italian decorative art, they being calculated to check any extending desire among gentlemen of taste and fortune to engage British talent upon similar works.

The principal apartment, forming an octagon, terminates in a cupola, the walls judiciously panelled with brilliant arabesques, relieved by delicate stuccoes and gilding, rendered subservient to eight frescoes, illustrative of Milton's Comus. The fine compartment by Mr. Eastlake is alone sufficient to prove the entire success awaiting our native artists in works of fresco. A second apartment is successfully painted in *encaustic*, powerful in colour, and firmly executed; while her Majesty's closet presents a magnificent adaptation of Italian art.

These beautiful decorations will not be finished for some time, and therefore any detailed notice would at present be injudicious. To the royal personages, at whose suggestions and private expense these works are creating, the British artist will have cause to be very grateful. An example of the highest class of decorative embellishment executed by Englishmen, and under such distinguished encouragement, will at the present time be of eminent service, and confer the highest honour upon its noble promoters.—I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

James Crabb.

67, New Bond-street, Feb. 6, 1845.

UNDERPINNING OLD WALLS.

Sir,—I should feel obliged if I could be informed, through the medium of your useful journal, whether I should incur any danger of a settlement by undersetting one side of a large house, for the purpose of adding a building with a cellar underneath.

It is proposed to build the cellar 4 feet below the foundation of the old building. The foundation is beach. How can a settlement be prevented if the undersetting be done with bricks and mortar, the latter being a long time before it gets dry?

It seems to me that undersetting much superincumbent weight can only safely be executed by using cement instead of mortar, but that would be expensive.—I remain, Sir, yours obediently, A Subscriber.

[Cement must be used; the first expense is the least.—Ed.]

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